

Statement of Douglas Siglin, Federal Affairs Director
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
To the Subcommittee on Fisheries and Oceans, Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives

September 23, 2005

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for inviting the Chesapeake Bay Foundation to today's hearing on S 260 and HR 2018, bills to authorize the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. We are supportive of these identical pieces of legislation for the reasons outlined below.

As you may know, our mission at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation is to protect and restore the health of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributary rivers and streams, including the abundance of, and diversity of, their living resources. As the Chairman certainly knows better than anyone, the Chesapeake Bay is in need of significant public and private help to restore its ecological health, which has been severely degraded over the past decades. Although many challenges face the Chesapeake Bay, the biggest single challenge is an excess of nitrogen and phosphorous, which each summer creates a severe "dead zone" in the Bay. The dead zone is an area where there simply is too little oxygen for fish and other aquatic creatures to live. According to scientists monitoring the health of the Bay for the Chesapeake Program, this summer's "dead zone" peaked in the first part of August, with about 41% of the Bay having less than 5 milligrams of oxygen per liter, and around 10% of the Bay lacking even 2 milligrams per liter – a critical threshold to sustain life. The areas of low and virtually no oxygen continue to grow in size, and this summer's numbers even exceeded the somewhat dire predictions made earlier in the year.

A key fact needed to understand the Chesapeake Bay is that it has the largest land area to water volume ratio of any significant body of water on earth. As a result, the Chesapeake Bay is particularly sensitive to human activity throughout its 64,000 square mile basin or watershed. Most of the 64,000 square miles is, of course, held by private landowners, making what happens on private land paramount to the future of the Chesapeake Bay. It is for this reason that the several federal and state programs to assist private landowners with technical assistance and funding to limit nitrogen and other types of pollution are so essential.

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, while not explicitly oriented to reducing nitrogen and phosphorus pollution, does help private landowners to achieve these critical objectives for the Bay. Wetlands, grasslands, forest buffers, and in-stream restoration – the habitats which the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program helps private landowners to re-create – are also powerful mechanisms to limit nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment pollution. The private landowners working with the Partners staff to re-establish these habitats are also helping to address the severe water quality challenges facing the Bay.

Let me just offer a couple of examples of how the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program is working to restore habitats and limit pollution to the Chesapeake Bay. Over the past five years the Partners program has played a critical role, either designing, or funding implementation, or both, in the restoration of over 4,000 acres of wetlands and reforestation in the Delmarva Peninsula. Of that total, over 1,000 acres has been in the Nanticoke watershed alone. Further west in the Upper Potomac watershed, the Partners program has provided funding to farmers enrolled in the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's Farm Stewardship Program to help pay for various kinds of agricultural best management practices after we installed cattle exclusion fencing and restored riparian buffers with local conservation organizations. Throughout the Bay watershed, in not only Maryland but Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Delaware and New York, the Partners program is working with landowners to design and implement projects that have a beneficial effect on the Chesapeake Bay.

In emphasizing the value of the Partners program for excess nutrient and sediment reduction, I certainly do not mean to slight the intrinsic value of the program in restoring native fish and wildlife to the Bay, including endangered species. The Partners program is playing an important role in eliminating invasive species, restoring native fish passage, and restoring waterfowl habitat. The key point that the Partners program as designed and implemented serves multiple goals for the Chesapeake Bay – assisting private landowners and communities, restoring valuable habitat for native terrestrial and aquatic life, and reducing the loads of excess nutrients and sediments into the Chesapeake Bay. It is a valuable program with a backlog of applications to participate that should be funded. Not only it, but several similar cooperative conservation programs operated by the Department of Interior agencies as well as the USDA need to be authorized and appropriated at the maximum possible level each year. We surely will be discussing more of those programs as we move into the development of the farm bill over the next several months.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation is grateful for the opportunity to support authorization of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program at the level suggested in the S 260 and HR 2018, and we urge the Resources Committee to fully support these bills as they move through the legislative process.

